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Balancing Workload

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Being a female professor in computing is a great career, full of opportunities to teach others the power of computation and conduct research into computational solutions that attack some of the world's hardest problems and shape the world of the future.

For female faculty members, additional opportunities abound to help improve the gender diversity in computing. Sometimes these opportunities take the form of special talks or meetings, or mentoring activities. Other times, these opportunities arise to satisfy a need for representation of minorities, or because of *exceptionalism* (i.e., being remembered or noticed and asked simply because you stand out as a member of a minority).

We love having these opportunities! They are part of what makes being a computer science faculty member a great career -- because one can have impact. But, too many opportunities can be detrimental if we lose control of our workloads. It is easy to take on too much, leaving too little time for our lives outside of work, our passions, ourselves; and sometimes ending up burned out or less effective than we want to be.

Fortunately, we work in a profession in which we exercise some control over which opportunities we take on: such as whether to travel to a meeting or conference, whether to accept an invitation to serve on a conference committee, whether to participate in a departmental service task that is beyond our required service load.

The purpose of this short article is to provide *seven* tips into how we, as a group of established female computer science faculty members, make decisions about what to take on. Since making decisions sometimes means saying "no", we also try to share some strategies we have used to say "no" ... gracefully.

Tip #1: Do I Add Value?

We have found a simple question that a good starting place to evaluate whether to take on some new opportunity: "Do I add value?" Asking this question helps frame whether your unique characteristics might make a difference or whether it is a task that others might be able to take on just as well. Another way of approaching the question is to ask, "If I had to do it right away and drop other things to do it -- would I?" This question can further help put into perspective how important the task is to you.

If you think you are being asked to fulfill some desire for minority representation, think carefully about whether minority representation would actually add value. For example, some departments have a rule that every committee must have at least one woman on it. It may be more important to ensure ample female representation on important committees (e.g., faculty hiring, promotion and tenure, chair search) than to spread them thinly across all committees.



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Tip #2: Take your Time, But Not Too Much Time

Many of us have gotten so excited about an opportunity that we say yes right away, only to later wonder why we said yes when we were already overloaded. A simple trick is to never answer a request, especially if it comes in over email, for 24 to 48 hours. This waiting period gives you time to reflect on the question about whether you provide unique value -- and whether you really are that excited about the opportunity. But don't wait too long to provide your answer -- the longer you wait, the more you might feel obligated to say "yes" to assuage your guilt for having kept the requestor waiting for so long.

A companion tip is that, if after 48 hours you still can't make a decision, perhaps this is not the right time to say yes.

Tip #3: Ask a "No" Buddy

Some of us have a "no" buddy -- an individual who can help us remember it is ok to say "no," at least some of the time! Your "no" buddy might help you think through an opportunity, reminding you to assess the cons as well as the pros of an opportunity. And remind you that, in many cases, you do not "have to" take on an opportunity.

Tip #4: Keep a Commitment Calendar

It is always easier to say "yes" to an opportunity that will happen sometime in the future. Have you ever said "yes" to serving on a committee or giving a talk that requires travel and regretting it as you pack to leave on the trip? Or maybe you have said "yes" to several things in the future and then later realized they all happen on the same day or in the same few weeks? To help avoid this situation, consider recording the commitments you make in your calendar. Then when a new opportunity comes in, you can consult your calendar and determine if you actually have the time to take it on.

A companion tip is to list your commitments and responsibilities on a board in your office, as a reminder of the great work that you are already doing.

Tip #5: Setting Limits

One of the fantastic things about being a faculty member is the range of different kinds of activities one is asked to do or can take on, such as serving on program committees, writing reference or award letters, or giving talks. Balancing between all of these activities can be hard; and as you become more senior in your field, the invitations and requests will come more frequently. One strategy some of us use is to set limits on the amount of an activity we will say "yes" to in a year. For instance, if you are getting asked to write many promotion and tenure letters a year, set a limit of how many you will write and when that limit is reached, say "no."

Tip #6: Negotiate

The hardest situation can be when your department head asks you to take on just one more



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thing for the department. In these situations, you might negotiate which of your current commitments you will *drop* if you take on the new request. This negotiation can be tricky. We have found it useful to discuss the options in terms of priorities. If the new request is really important, which responsibility is your department head willing to deprioritize and remove from your plate in return? Then, stick to your guns and step away from the deprioritized commitment.

Tip #7: Leave Time for the Unexpected

It is ok not to be fully scheduled and committed every second of every work day. If you say “yes” to too much too far ahead, you may end up in situations we have been in where we don’t have time or energy to take on a fantastic opportunity that comes up out of the blue. Try to leave some time in your schedule for the unexpected. At the worst, you’ll have more time to spend on other passions.

Saying No

A new opportunity arises. You draw on the tips above and have made a decision to turn down the opportunity. How do you say “no”? Especially, how do you say “no” to something you really want to do, just not now; or to someone you really respect?

We have used the following approaches to say “no” gracefully:

- Acknowledge that you are grateful for the opportunity and that in the future, you would be pleased to be asked again, but are unable to take on the opportunity this time.
- Explain briefly that you have a very busy schedule during the timeframe requested but would be willing to consider a similar request in the future if you have more warning.
- Nominate others, perhaps more junior faculty, who might benefit from the opportunity even more than you would. In addition to passing the opportunity on to someone who might be able to take advantage of it, this often has the effect of turning the requestor’s attention away from your rejection and towards the new nominees.

Above all, when saying “no”, remember it is a privilege to be asked. Overall, it is a really good problem to have people who respect you and want to work with you.

We are not writing as experts in balancing workload. We have all lived through periods in our lives where we have taken on too much. We all find it useful to keep these tips handy to make sure we make decisions on opportunities in accordance with our own values. Having to make choices on amazing opportunities is a great problem to have.

Thanks to all the wonderful women faculty who contributed to the ideas in this article.